THE PLIOCENE SKULL

BY BRET HARTE

SKETCHES BY E.M. SCHAEFFER M.D.

DEC. 8. 1870

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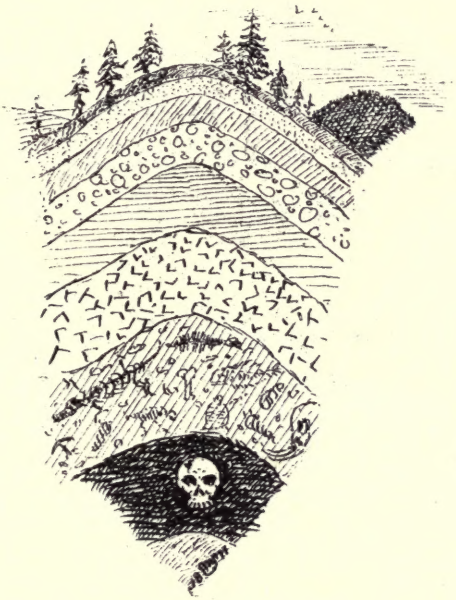
SPEAK, *O Man less recent! Fragmentary fossil,*
Primal pioneer of Pliocene formation,
Hid in lowest drifts below the earliest stratum
Of volcanic tufa!

— *Older than the beasts, the oldest Palæotherium;*
Older than the trees, the oldest Cryptogamia;

Older than the hills, those infantile eruptions
Of Earth's epidermis.



Eo—Mio—Plio— whatsoe'er the "cene" was
That those vacant sockets filled with awe and wonder—
Whether shores Devonian or Silurian beaches—
Tell us thy strange story!

Or has the Professor slightly antedated
By some thousand years thy advent on this planet,
Giving thee an air that's somewhat better fitted
For cold-blooded creatures?

Wert thou true spectator of that mighty forest
When above thy head the stately Sigillaria
Reared its columned trunks in that remote and distant
Carboniferous epoch?

Tell us of that scene—the dim and watery woodland
Songless, silent, hushed, with never bird or insect,
Veiled with spreading fronds and screened with
tall club-mosses,
Lycopodiacea—

When beside thee walked the solemn Plesiosaurus,
And around thee crept the festive Ichthyosaurus,
While from time to time above thee flew and circled
Cheerful Pterodactyls.

Tell us of thy food—those half marine refections,
Crinoids on the shell and Brachipods au naturel—
Cuttle-fish to which the pieuvre of Victor Hugo
Seems a periwinkle.

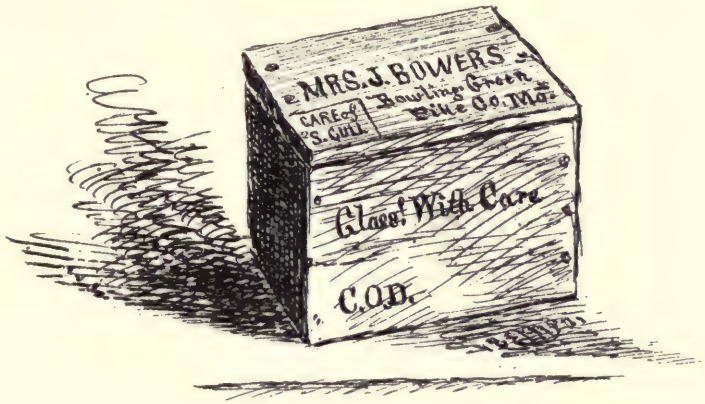
Speak, thou awful vestige of the Earth's creation—
Solitary fragment of remains organic!

Tell the wondrous secrets of thy past existence—
—Speak! thou oldest primate!"

Even as I gazed a thrill of the maxilla
And a lateral movement of the condyloid process,
With post-pliocene sounds of healthy mastication.
Ground the teeth together.

And, from that imperfect dental exhibition,
Stained with expressed juices of the weed Nicotian,

Came these hollow accents, blent with
softer murmurs
Of expectoration:

"Which my name is Bowers, and
my crust was busted
Falling down a shaft, in Calaveras county,

But I'd take it kindly if you'd send the pieces
Home to old Missouri!"